

## *SOCIAL MEDIA AS A LABORATORY OF VALUE CREATION IN THE CSR FIELD*

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to provide insights about how Social Media might be considered as an effective marketing tool to communicate CSR efforts and to create value for firms. After a brief review of the literature concerning CSR and Social Media Strategy from a marketing perspective, we focus on four Italian empirical case studies, two large firms and two SMEs. This paper attempts to provide more knowledge about the CSR-SMEs relationship which is still scant in literature.

**Keywords:** *Corporate Social Responsibility, Social Media Marketing, Value Creation, Marketing Communication*

### **Introduction**

The topic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has recently experienced rapid growth along the years in a wide variety of fields, i.e. management, ethics, political theory, economics, law and organizational science. Attention towards CSR has also been echoed by the marketing literature (e.g. Maignan and Ferrell 2004, Morsing et al. 2008, Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Nevertheless, despite an increasing emphasis on CSR, relatively little attention has been paid to the use of Social Media as an effective marketing tool to communicate CSR efforts and to create value for firms. Social Media represent an important opportunity for firms to improve relationships with internal and external stakeholders and to strengthen their engagement (Cherubini and Pattuglia 2012, Korschun and Du 2013, Micelli and Finotto 2010), an aspect which represents a fundamental milestone in the CSR literature. As suggested by Korschun and Du (2013), the use of Social Media for CSR aims can generate substantial value for companies and the entire society.

The paper is organized as follows: first we discuss a brief literature review on CSR and Social Media Strategy from a marketing perspective. Then we introduce an empirical analysis by describing methodology and results gained from four case studies. In the final section, directions for further research are provided.

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## 1. Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Media Strategy

The benefits that socially responsible business practice can bring to a firm, such as customer loyalty, long-term sustainability and competitive advantage, have been well defined by the literature (e.g. Bhattacharya and Sen 2004, Bhattacharya et al. 2008, Du et al. 2010, Ellen et al. 2000, Pomeroy and Dolnicar 2009, Turban and Greening 1996, Lev et al. 2010).

Nevertheless, in order to properly manage stakeholder relationships and company reputation, a firm not only needs to integrate CSR in the overall strategy but the right marketing and communication tools must also be used (Fieseler et al. 2009). The integration of social responsibility into the marketing strategy of firms is increasingly becoming an important issue (e.g. Fiocca and Sebastiani 2009, van de Ven 2008, Jahdi and Acikdalli 2009, Jones et al. 2008, Du et al. 2010) even if “CSR research has not become a widely studied topic in premier marketing journals” (Chabowski et al. 2011, p. 56). Being perceived as socially responsible across stakeholder help companies to build a corporate reputation of social commitment (Maignan and Ferrell 2004, Du et al. 2010, Lyes et al. 2012). Maignan and Ferrell’s work (2004) provides an interesting framework outlining eight steps to properly implement CSR from a marketing perspective.

With regard to the communication of CSR efforts scholars have conflicting views. While some researchers suggest that communication about CSR activities does not necessarily result in positive effects for companies (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001), others find that firms communicating their social efforts are viewed more positively and credibly (Swaen and Vanhamme 2004). Given that CSR communication is directed to many potential audiences, ranging from investors to customers and employees, it is important for a company to tailor its CSR communication to the specific need of stakeholder groups (Du et al. 2010, Morsing et al. 2008). Du et al. (2010) refer to a tradeoff between controllability and credibility in communicating CSR and argue that the more controllable the source of communication is, the less credible the message will be perceived. As a consequence they suggest the use of blogs and Social Media in order to create credible word of mouth among its stakeholder about the organization’s CSR (Fieseler et al. 2009). Also Korschun and Du (2013) suggest that the employment of Social Media in the CSR context can generate substantial value for companies and society and assert that virtual CSR dialogues<sup>1</sup> lie in between Social Media and CSR. Despite the increasing emphasis on marketing research on CSR, relatively little attention has been paid to the use of Social Media and to the management of virtual CSR dialogues with stakeholders. Social Media<sup>2</sup> are indeed changing the ways in which consumers connect with firms

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<sup>1</sup> “Company’s strategic utilization of SM to proactively engage stakeholders in CSR activities” (Korschun and Du, 2013, p. 1495)

<sup>2</sup> Social Media are defined as “internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). The array of Social Media expands daily but we can mention the following list based on Woodcock et al. (2011,

and became aware of CSR efforts. Social Media have empowered consumers to connect, share and collaborate, creating spheres of influence which have fundamentally altered the way marketers engage in influencing activities (Cherubini and Pattuglia 2012, Driessen et al. 2013, Finotto and Micelli 2010). The interactive nature of Social Media is likely to blur the role integrity of sellers and customers by expanding the role of customers by including them in value creation and by becoming co-creators and co-producers (Cherubini and Pattuglia 2012, Fieseler et al. 2009, Micelli 2000, Pastore 2009, Toffler 1980, Vargo and Lush 2004). With the rise of Social Media, power has been even more shifted from marketing managers to individuals and communities (Finotto and Micelli 2010, Kietzmann et al. 2011, O'Reilly 2005, Mangold and Faulds 2009, Mortara and Sinisi 2012, Pastore 2009, Vernuccio et al. 2012). Value is therefore created in the network of stakeholder relationships (Rullani 2004a) and not only by the supplier, as stated by the logic dominating Porter's traditional value chain.

Nevertheless, as pointed out by the Lundquist research (2012), the majority of Italian firms are not using Social Media. There is a "fair degree of uncertainty with respect to allocating marketing effort and budget to Social Media" (Weinberg and Pehlivan 2011, p. 275). Few of today's marketers operate within a systematic approach to Social Media Strategy management (Hanna et al. 2011, Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, Macnamara and Zerfass 2012). One of the leading questions for Social Media Marketing is given by the measurement of returns on investment. Hoffmann and Fodor (2010) suggest that returns from SM investments should not always be measured in cash, but also by customer behavior tied to specific social media applications. Marketing managers are interested in metrics used to explain the success or failures of marketing campaigns: brand awareness, visitors, number of downloads, number of participants of an event, product visibility (Cosenza 2012). PR managers, instead, wish to know about the sentiment, the share of voice, the citations; they are mainly focused on reputation, which is also the aim of Corporate Communication (Cornelissen 2008, Invernizzi 2004, Siano 2012).

## 2. Methodology

A pilot study based on qualitative research was carried out in the form of in depth semi-structured interviews with four firms. Since literature about SMEs is scant, we decided to compare two Italian large firms with two SMEs in order to better define the differences and similarities among firms of different sizes for the adoption of CSR

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p.64): Blogs; Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter,...); YouTube; Photosharing (e.g. Flickr); Interest sharing (e.g. Pinterest); Interactive applications; Virtual communities; Location based networks (e.g. Foursquare); Aggregating channels (e.g. comparison sites); Discussion groups/user forums. In our analysis we don't consider the Business Social Networks as Social Media, as suggested by Galano and Marchigiani (2013).

and Social Media Strategy. The study used a collective case study approach (Yin, 1984). Interviews were analyzed by drawing out key CSR and Social Media themes and by comparing the interviewee responses. Quotes, which have been literally translated into English for the purpose of this paper, are used to illustrate key research findings. The analysis was also based on the official publications available on the corporate websites and on reports, brochures and some internal documents provided by the interviewees. The table summarizes the main features of the case studies analyzed:

*Table 1 – Case Studies*

	<b>Firm</b>	<b>Information</b>	<b>Employees</b>	<b>Turnover</b>	<b>Social Networks</b>
<b>SMEs</b>	<b>Molino Moras Srl</b>	<u>Location:</u> Trivignano Udinese (UD) <u>Sector:</u> food <u>Website:</u> <a href="http://www.molinomoras.it">www.molinomoras.it</a>	15	€ 2,5 mln	Facebook
	<b>Perlage Wines Srl</b>	<u>Location:</u> Farra di Soligo (TDV) <u>Sector:</u> organic wine <u>Website:</u> <a href="http://www.perlagewines.com">www.perlagewines.com</a>	20	€ 3 mln	Facebook LinkedIN Twitter Pinterest You Tube
<b>Large firms</b>	<b>illycaffè Spa</b>	<u>Location:</u> Trieste <u>Sector:</u> production and distribution of coffee <u>Website:</u> <a href="http://www.illy.com">www.illy.com</a>	898	€ 342 mln	Facebook Flickr Google Plus Instagram You Tube Twitter
	<b>Gruppo Hera Spa</b>	<u>Location:</u> Bologna <u>Sector:</u> multi-utility <u>Website:</u> <a href="http://www.gruppohera.it">www.gruppohera.it</a>	6.663	€ 1075 mln	Flickr iTunes LinkedIn You Tube Pinterest Slideshare

### 3. Findings and discussion

The way in which managers of our case studies included CSR in the discourse shows how CSR is primarily perceived as a question of ethical and moral behavior, with a crucial role in the firm's strategy. Nevertheless we can find some differences between the CSR policies in SMEs and in large firms.

In large firms sustainability is better codified and formalized. For example, in illycaffè there is a Sustainability committee and in Gruppo Hera a CSR Department, which defines the guidelines of sustainability issues, promotes CSR initiatives and draws up the Sustainability Report (in Gruppo Hera from 2002, in illycaffè it is called

Sustainability Value Report whose first edition was provided in 2012 accompanied by an ethical code and the Sustainability Manifesto).

*“Sustainability is an important asset for illycaffè. We define ourselves as a stakeholder company pursuing life improvement through economic, social and environmental sustainability.”<sup>3</sup> Barbara Dolenc – Social Media Manager illycaffè Spa*

*“With the annual publication of the Sustainability Report since 2003 and the subsequent creation of a Corporate Social Responsibility Department, Hera has integrated corporate social responsibility into its strategy, seeing it as a valid tool to increase competitiveness and as a key element to achieve sustainable development over time.” Filippo Bocchi – CSR Manager Hera Group*

These tools require the investment of time, financial resources and competencies that SMEs cannot provide (Russo and Tencati 2008). As suggested by many scholars, much of the literature on large organizations seems to be of little relevance for SMEs because “CSR is different when applied to SMEs because of the intrinsic differences between large firms and SMEs” (Russo and Perrini 2010, p. 209). As with regard to the two SMEs we have analyzed, Molino Moras and Perlage Wines, results confirmed what has been highlighted by literature. SMEs are already taking measures to carry out and be involved in their social responsibility but often this occurs without consciously having a CSR Strategy. As noted by Kechiche and Soparnot (2012), SMEs consider CSR not as an add-on but rather as part of overall day-to-day management even if they practice non-systematic, non-formalized, non-structured CSR (Perrini et al. 2007, Russo and Tencati 2009, Coppa and Sriramesh 2013).

*“Sustainability is embedded in our culture since the early day of our history but, until 2010, it was not well communicated. We had a lot of initiatives (sponsorships, donations to poor children, ...) but without a real CSR strategy” Nicoletta Moras – President Molino Moras Srl*

*“Perlage Wines was born as an ethical company. We produce organic wines and attention towards the environment and society is one of our basic values” Erika Gallon – Marketing manager Perlage Wines*

The communication of social responsible practices of Perlage Wines is mainly based on their blog (updated 2-3 times a week) and the Facebook page even if “it is not easy to receive likes or sharings about our CSR activities which are mainly related to the environment (e.g. the use of vegetal compounds for the fertilization of vineyards, lower quantities of copper in vineyards, recyclable bottles) and to stakeholders (such as collaboration for the grape harvest with CEOD - children with disabilities - in the municipality of Farra di Soligo, initiatives of cause related marketing for the earthquake in Emilia, attention towards young people thanks to “responsible drinking” events). Molino Moras has carried out in the last years many activities in the CSR field, such as sponsorships (mainly sports associations), distance adoption of

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<sup>3</sup> In 2013 illycaffè Spa, has been the only Italian company present in the 100 Ethisphere Institute World’s Most Ethical Companies list and in 2011 illycaffè was the first firm in the world to obtain the “DNV Responsible Supply Chain Process” Certification by Det Norske Veritas.

children, donations (computers, games,...). Since 2010 they have financed a PhD scholarship in Medicine at the University of Udine. In order to communicate this effort and engage stakeholders they organized fashion shows and fund-raising events (cooking courses, open days), communicated through the Facebook page. *“Before the advent of Web and Social Media there was no way to communicate directly and immediately, now it is more easy to create awareness among stakeholders.”*

As we can see, SMEs, due to their particular dependency on networks of interpersonal relationships, are especially interested in investing in social capital (Murillo and Lozano 2006, Russo and Perrini 2010, Spence 1999, Spence et al. 2003) and rely mostly on the company owner/manager's values (e.g. Spence et al. 2003, Murillo and Lozano 2006),

With regard to the two large firms, sustainability activities are communicated through a mix of communication tools, including brochures, corporate presentations, websites and Social Media.<sup>4</sup> We see that the larger the firm the better defined the roles. Social Media in illycaffè are managed by the PR department because – according to Barbara Dolenc – *“in our case the main objective is to take care of the company's reputation. If the aim of Social Media Strategy were to just sell products it would be probably managed by the Marketing department”*. This assumption is very important in the ongoing debate on the relationship PR - Marketing in Social Media Management. For illycaffè is important to highlight that the CSR is part of the DNA of the company and it is considered as an integral part of the company strategy, not only a communication tool. This assumption is confirmed by the literature. The main issues which CSR communication faces is given by stakeholder awareness, which is usually low (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004, Du et al. 2010, Sen et al. 2006) and by stakeholder skepticism (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013, van de Ven 2008). Indeed, in illycaffè, information concerning CSR published in Social Networks refers always to the Value Report<sup>5</sup> in order to rely on certified data. In publicizing CSR efforts, corporation might take into consideration the “reputational risk” (Siano 2012) and be aware of the consequences of their actions. Source credibility and reliability are the major requirements for CSR message acceptance and communication effectiveness (Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009).

*“The challenge is to convey the idea of a sustainable company everytime we say something, not only when we speak about sustainable data”* – Barbara Dolenc

Even if the most popular Social Media is Facebook, communicating about CSR is not easy because, as suggested by Cosenza's Social Media Positioning Map (2012, p. 223), Facebook is useful to improve relationships with a large audience without any specific interests, therefore it is located within in the space “delocalization

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<sup>4</sup> Gruppo Hera Spa has received a lot of awards regarding their web communication: the first place in the “Lundquist Employer Branding 2012 Awards” and in the “CSR Online Awards 2012”. Sustainability issues are carefully woven into the Group's online corporate presence.

<sup>5</sup> The Value Report is a document, published for the first time in 2012, summarizing the value the company creates along the supplychain. In September 2013 the second release will be published and Social Networks will be better integrated for improved content sharing.

conversation”. illycaffè is considering LinkedIn to discuss sustainability issues. In fact this Social Network is more suitable to stimulate focalized conversations about specific topics with a niche-public (Cosenza 2012, Kietzmann et al. 2011). As suggested by Cosenza (2012) one of the key elements of Social Media Strategy definition is given by the positioning on the Social Media Map in order to “allocate resources to engage effectively with social media”<sup>6</sup> (Kietzmann et al. 2011, p. 242). Gruppo Hera, indeed, has decided to not join Facebook or Twitter since they are not considered as strategic tools for the company.

*“We use YouTube, where we can find a lot of institutional videos and interviews with managers, and LinkedIn which has more than 4.000 followers, an important channel also for job offers”* Micaela Maini – Web Communication Manager Gruppo Hera.

Nevertheless they prefer to carry out an online PR activity. Every week the Communication Department receives a report on online communication about Gruppo Hera. It is worth mentioning that the analysis of the matrix of 2012 highlighted how a strength point of Hera is social sensitivity. This suggests that CSR communication is well perceived by stakeholders and is in line with their transparency expectations. In 2012 Hera began to promote e-bills with a raising awareness campaign by means of web channel [www.alberi.gruppohera.it](http://www.alberi.gruppohera.it), a Facebook and a Pinterest page, in line with implementation phase of the CSR co-creation model by Korschun and Du (2013).

#### **4. Conclusion and further research**

The findings of our study have highlighted that the use of Social Media for CSR field is mainly aimed at enhancing firm reputation in the community of stakeholders in order to engage them and it is not really linked to performance measures. Nevertheless, as noted by Korschun and Du (2013), virtual CSR dialogues through SM can generate value for the company, thanks to the stakeholder behavior (e.g. consumption, employment, investment). Further research, through the analysis of case studies, is needed to develop a theoretical framework in order to provide and test research hypotheses on the relationship between CSR and Social Media Marketing. Future research could identify how to measure stakeholder behavior and the consequences on the company’s CSR strategy. More theoretical insights about the CSR-SMEs relationship are needed in order to understand how responsible management can contribute to value creation.

Further research should also analyze the perceptions of the stakeholders about CSR and Social Media Strategy in order to understand if skeptical perceptions could be reduced when CSR information is easily accessible for them.

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<sup>6</sup> Kietzmann et al. (2011) have provided a honeycomb framework of seven social media building blocks in order to help managers choose the right tools and understand the implications for firms.

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